CHAPTER 13 - VISUAL RESOURCES

13.1 RESOURCE OVERVIEW

The Moab Field Office (Moab FO) contains an unusually large number of areas that possess a high degree of scenic quality and a high level of visual sensitivity, drawing an increasing number of visitors each year who come to the area to recreate and sightsee. These visual attributes have made the area within the Moab FO an internationally recognized, world-famous scenic destination. In general, high scenic quality within the Moab FO is a product of the area's extraordinary topography, geology, and cultural history. Scenically diverse vistas and canyon river ways, rare and unusual geological formations, colorful and highly contrasting sandstones, and numerous prehistoric rock art and structures contribute to the area's high visual quality. Areas with high visual sensitivity within the Moab FO are the result of the high degree of visitor interest in and public concern for a particular area's visual resources, an area's high degree of public visibility, the level of use of an area by the public, and the type of visitor use that an area receives (BLM 1992).

The major areas within the Moab FO that possess both outstanding scenic quality and high visual sensitivity include, but are not limited to: the Wilson Arch area; Canyon Rims (encompassing the area from Harts Draw to Hurrah Pass); the Dead Horse Point/Shafer Trail area; Mill Creek Canyon; an area including Negro Bill Canyon and extending to Porcupine Rim; Beaver Creek; Fisher Creek and its tributaries, the area around Mill and Tusher Canyons; and the Fisher Tower/Onion Creek area. Visually scenic and sensitive river areas include: the Colorado River (from Dewey Bridge to the border of Canyonlands National Park); the Westwater Canyon/Dolores River area; and Labyrinth Canyon (the Green River and its tributaries).

Areas of high scenic quality and visual sensitivity that are associated with travel corridors include: the Kane Creek area (from U.S. Highway 191 to its confluence with the Colorado River); the non-paved portion of the Potash Road (Shafer Basin) from Utah Highway 279 to the border with Canyonlands National Park; and the State Highway 313/Seven Mile Canyon/Monitor-Merrimac Buttes area. Other major scenic travel corridors within the Moab FO include U.S. Highway 191 and State Highways 128, 279, and 313, which have been designated as State Scenic Byways, as well as Canyon Rims and the Manti-LaSal Loop Road that are designated as State Scenic Backways. The Moab FO also contains thousands of miles of jeep, bike, and foot trails that are traveled as scenic routes, many of which are internationally recognized.

13.2 SPECIFIC MANDATES AND AUTHORITY

The visual resources within the Moab planning area are managed under numerous federal and state laws and regulations. The major applicable laws and regulations are listed below.

- BLM's responsibility to manage the scenic resources of the public lands is established by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976 (FLPMA) which states that: "...public lands will be managed in a manner which will protect the quality of the scenic (visual) values of these lands."

- The National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) requires that measures be taken to "...assure for all Americans...aesthetically pleasing surroundings...." This responsibility is reinforced by the BLM's mission statement: "It is the mission of the Bureau of Land Management to sustain the health, diversity, and productivity of the public lands for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations."

BLM policy and direction for managing visual resources are provided in the following Manual, Information Bulletins, and Instruction Memorandum:

- BLM Manual 8400 Series, Visual Resource Management (VRM) – Dictates policy and procedures for the VRM system, outlines procedures for the inventory, evaluation, and classification of visual resources on BLM administered lands. The series provides a framework for establishing guidelines for reducing visual impacts, describes the use of the visual contrast rating system in analyzing visual impacts, and describes the steps for portraying the visual resource requirements to determine whether a project can meet acceptable limits of impact on the visual resource.
- BLM Information Bulletin 98-135 – Restates the BLM policy on the use of VRM in land-use planning, decision-making, and environmental documents. VRM management classes shall be assigned to all public lands as part of the Record of Decision for an RMP. Visual design considerations shall be incorporated into all surface-disturbing projects occurring on public lands regardless of the size or potential visual impact of these projects.
- BLM Information Bulletin 98-164 – Provides additional BLM guidance on the use of VRM, when making VRM-related decisions.
- BLM Instruction Memorandum, UT-83-144 – Directs that oil and gas facilities be painted in a uniform color that does not contrast with the surrounding landscape, and provides a list of ten standardized colors from which to select.

13.3 CURRENT MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

The current RMP for the Moab FO was completed in 1985 (referred to as the Grand Resource Area RMP). Visual resource inventory classes were considered in the Environmental Impact Statement prepared for the RMP but the RMP did not recognize visual resources as a program requiring specific management actions. These inventory classes, and associated acreages, are listed in Table 1, Appendix 13-A. Figure 10-1 – Grand RMP VRM Management Classes depicts the locations of these classes. An updated visual resource inventory has been completed since the current RMP was approved (see Table 2, Appendix 13-A). Figure 13-2 – Current VRM Inventory Classes depicts the locations of the inventory classes. Details about the Visual Resource Management Classification process are provided in Appendix 13-B.

Management actions in the current RMP related to visual resources are integrated with other programs such as recreation and include:

- Designate Off-Road Vehicle (ORV) use for 596,234 acres as limited to existing roads and trails to protect watershed and scenic values (this would include the Mancos Shale areas; the Colorado, Dolores, and Green river corridors; Canyon Rims Recreation Area; and the Dead Horse Point State Park viewshed). Also, designate 24,454 acres as closed to ORV

use to protect recreation and scenic values (this would include Behind the Rocks, Negro Bill Canyon, Westwater Canyon, Windwhistle and Hatch Point campgrounds, Needles and Anticline Overlooks, and the Onion Creek sensitive plant site.

- Leave 1,850 acres under existing mineral withdrawals to protect widely scattered campgrounds and scenic sites.
- Manage acreage along the Dolores and Colorado Rivers to prevent changes in their visual character in order to support their potential designation as rivers included in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Support the protection of scenic values along the Dolores and Colorado Rivers. Withdraw 32,000 acres along the Colorado River from new mineral entry in order to protect scenic values.
- Maintain three scenic overlooks and 27 miles of scenic road systems to provide sightseeing opportunities.
- Designate 15,206 acres in the Mill Creek and East Mill Creek areas as limited to designated roads and trails, which would close seven miles of duplicate roads and allow for protection of scenic values.
- Designate 1,375 acres in Negro Bill Canyon as an Outstanding Natural Area (ONA) to protect scenic recreational values.
- Under an amendment to the current RMP for Canyon Rims Recreation Area, manage 33,037 acres as VRM II and 67,236 acres as VRM III (BLM 2002).

13.3.1 Current Conditions

Under the current RMP, written in 1985, a visual resource inventory was completed, but no management objectives were identified for VRM, and no management classes were established for the Moab planning area. VRM management classes and objectives were established for Canyon Rims in 2002, through the Canyon Rims Recreation Area Management Plan Amendment (BLM 2002). With the exception of Canyon Rims (which has VRM management objectives), site-specific mitigation of impacts to visual resources is being implemented through project EAs, with reference to the 1985 RMP visual resource inventory.

Cumulative impacts to the landscape are resulting from the tremendous increases in recreation and tourism, vehicular travel, the increasing number of roads and trails, and the increasing numbers of sightseers attracted to the area for its extraordinary scenic qualities. Additional impacts are resulting from the development of utility corridors, oil and gas development, seismic exploration, and other land use disturbances. The greatest impacts are being created by recreational activities and OHV use.

Recreational activities and OHV use are impacting visual resources most intensely in the areas surrounding the city of Moab from north to I-70, south to Lisbon Valley, east to the Colorado state line, and west to the Green River. There have been recent conflicts between visual resources and oil and gas development/exploration in the Big Flat area along State Scenic Byway 313 and in the Dome Plateau area. Another conflict with visual resources exists with the utility corridor along U.S. Highway 191. Commercial filming, rights-of-way, and range improvements are other sources of conflict with visual resources.

The increasing number of roads being utilized by recreationists in the Moab FO is having indirect affects on visual resources. Seldom Seen zones are decreasing within the Moab FO, and an increase in the number of vehicles and people on BLM roads are creating changes in foreground and middleground views, and changes in visual sensitivity. An increasingly utilized network of two-track roads and routes are creating conditions that allow OHV users, campers, and woodcutters to expand surface disturbances and impact visual resources.

A visual resource inventory has been conducted within the Moab FO since the current RMP was approved. Some areas affected by the visual inventory include:

- Canyon Rims
- Sand Flats
- Moab Canyon
- The SR-313 corridor
- Wilson Arch
- The Monitor-Merrimac-Butte viewshed
- The east side of the LaSal Mountains
- Seven Mile Mesa
- Fisher Mesa
- Fisher Valley
- Castle Valley
- Behind the Rocks
- Mineral Point
- Horsethief Point (Sweeten 2003)

Resource monitoring is occasional and intermittent, but monitoring does confirm the increased recreational use, the tendency for visitors to seek out new places to drive and to camp, and the associated land disturbances created by these activities.

13.4 RESOURCE DEMAND AND ANALYSIS FORECAST

13.4.1 Trends

The tourist industry within the Moab FO is increasing, based on increased recreational use, increased vehicular use, and increased National Park visitation which spills over onto BLM lands (see Chapter 10 – Recreation). This increase is contributing to the cumulative impact on visual resources.

The increased use of OHVs, dispersed camping, and trail use are having a long-term impact on visual resources. Under the existing RMP, emergency limitations on off-road vehicle travel and camping have been and may continue to be increased to preserve visual resources. Oil and gas exploration and development are expected to continue within the Moab FO and will contribute some additional impacts to visual resources. In general, recreation, visitation, and sightseeing

trends as well as continued oil and gas exploration and development suggest increasing cumulative impacts to visual resources within the Moab FO.

13.4.2 Demands

At present, there is a great demand for access to and activities within scenic areas. Increased visitation to the area can be attributed to the extraordinary scenic quality of the area. The preferred use of the area has changed since the current RMP was written. The increased number of visitors attracted by the area's scenic quality has prompted the designation of more roads for scenic drives and recreational use (see Chapter 10 – Recreation).

13.5 CONSISTENCY WITH NON-BUREAU PLANS

13.5.1 National Park Service

The General Management Plan for Arches (1989) addresses lands adjacent to the Park. The area of National Park Service concern extends to lands adjacent to the Park containing resources that are critical to the health of park ecosystems or that contribute significantly to visitor enjoyment. Such resources include, but are not limited to: landscapes visible from park viewpoints, roads and backcountry areas, watersheds, wildlife, and archaeological or historical sites. Specific concerns include: flaring of gas in the Big Flat area, telecommunication towers in the Moab area, and development on Canyon Rims that may become visible from Arches.

The General Management Plan for Canyonlands (BLM 1985) did not address visual resources.

13.5.2 Manti-LaSal National Forest

The Forest service has a Scenery Management System that uses different terms but is very similar to the BLM VRM system. The Manti-La Sal National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan (1986) states, as a Forest Management Goal, that the USFS will "maintain, enhance, and/or rehabilitate visual resources to the planned Visual Quality Objective (VQO)." The Forest Service is currently revising this plan, which provides an opportunity for coordination and consistent visual resource management between the new Moab FO and Forest Service land use plans, across administrative boundaries.

13.5.3 Grand County

The Grand County General Plan has a stated visual quality policy objective. Policy Statement 5 – Protect Sensitive Lands states that "Grand County should protect sensitive lands, open spaces, and scenic views…." The Implementation Actions of the policy include protection of riparian corridors, incentives for transfer of development rights from sensitive lands to other sites, and asking that land developers show how their projects will minimize visual contrasts with the natural setting in visually sensitive areas (Grand County 1996).

The Grand County General Plan Update (Grand County 2004) states that, as required by federal law, the BLM and USFS "conduct a consistency review with Grand County when formulating plans or making land-use decisions." The Sensitive Lands Policy would "preserve scenic quality and honor socio-economic value of critical viewsheds outside of developed areas…."

Implementation of this policy would be through: 1) consideration of sensitive lands in all development reviews; 2) asking developers to demonstrate how projects are hidden from view from visually sensitive areas; and 3) restricting color as necessary to blend with the site.

13.5.4 San Juan County

The San Juan County Plan does not have a stated visual resource policy objective, however the County intends to actively participate in State and Federal planning processes. The County "has very strong opinions on public access" and the County policy on public access is that "San Juan County claims all roads and trails over public land that were constructed prior to the passage of FLPMA." The County planning objective is to actively work to maintain and preserve public land access throughout the entire county (San Juan County 1996).

13.5.5 Adjacent Federal Lands

The BLM Monticello and Price Field Offices are currently preparing RMPs that provide an opportunity for coordination and consistent management of visual resources across administrative boundaries. The new Colorado Canyons National Conservation Area is currently in the planning process.

13.6 ISSUES OR CONCERNS

The current RMP does not recognize Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) as VRM Class I. As required under FLPMA, the wilderness characteristics of WSAs are protected (as VRM Class I) until Congress makes a final decision on each WSA through legislation to add all or part of a WSA to the National Wilderness Preservation System or to release it from wilderness review. These VRM Class I areas need to be reflected in the new RMP. Table 2 (Appendix 13-A) includes the current WSA VRM Class I acreage in the Moab FO, based on GIS coverage calculations (BLM 2003).

The VRM Class V designation is obsolete. Any reference to this visual class should be omitted from the new RMP/EIS.

The Moab FO has been visually inventoried since the current RMP was approved (see Figure 13-2 – Current VRM Inventory Classes). These changes should be reflected in the new RMP.

The visual quality management system for Wild and Scenic Rivers is different than the BLM's VRM system. The VRM system needs to address the visual character along Wild and Scenic River corridors.

The current RMP does not address the current cumulative impacts to visual resources. Recreational use, and oil and gas exploration and development are two activities that should be included in the analysis for cumulative impacts on visual resources. Recreation is widely dispersed in the Moab FO; permitted activities, such as seismic exploration and oil and gas development are also widely dispersed, with the potential to impact more areas within the Moab FO through additional lease sales and possibly full development that would include access roads, pipelines, and maintenance facilities.

The RMP needs to identify the carrying capacity of recreational use in visually sensitive, high-use areas.

13.7 MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS

13.7.1 Opportunities

Consider and conduct a review of potential Areas of Critical Environmental Concern (ACECs) in the Moab FO. ACECs include a broad range of resources including scenic values and resources. There are areas within the FO resource management area that need special management to protect outstanding visual values. ACEC designation allows special management considerations to be given to this resource, and should be included in the planning process.

Consider imposing restrictions and/or improve management guidelines for OHV use within the FO resource management planning area to reduce the rate of visual quality degradation. Management guidelines might include: 1) designating all public lands as open, closed, and limited to OHV use; and 2) closing OHV trails in visually sensitive areas.

Consider visual resources along Wild and Scenic River corridors. Integrate Wild and Scenic River visual characteristics criteria with BLM VRM objectives.

Coordinate with the National Park Service to address common scenic and sensitivity issues and concerns. Similarly, coordinate with the Monticello FO to address scenic quality concerns in the vicinity of Canyon Rims (in the Moab FO) and Lockhart Basin (in the Monticello FO).

Develop a visual resource-monitoring program.

13.7.2 Limitations

Mitigating visual intrusions to meet VRM objectives in visually sensitive, high-use areas will be difficult.

13.8 REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 13-A

VRM INVENTORY CLASSES AND ACREAGES

Table 1. Grand RMP VRM Inventory Classes	
VRM Class	**Acres[1]**
1	0
2	787,000
3	791,000
4	834,000
Total	**2,412,000**
Source: BLM 1983 [1]Acreage figures were rounded to the nearest thousand	

Table 2. Current VRM Inventory Classes	
VRM Class	**Acres**
1	370,768
2	657,241
3	1,076,242
4	332,771
Total	**2,437,022**
Source: BLM 2003	

APPENDIX 13-B

VISUAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLASSIFICATION PROCESS

Five steps are involved in the visual resource management (VRM) classification process. These are: 1) outlining and numerical evaluation of scenic quality; 2) outlining of visual sensitivity levels; 3) delineating distance zones; 4) overlaying the scenic quality, sensitivity levels and distance zones using a matrix to develop visual resource inventory classes (VRI) I-IV; and 5) adjusting the inventory to meet the multiple use goals of the RMP and designating VRM management classes I-IV with objectives for each class through the planning process.

SCENIC QUALITY

The first step is accomplished by outlining scenery of similar nature on a topographic map. Once the area has been outlined, numerical values are given to its key factors (landform, color, water, vegetation, adjacent scenery, scarcity, and cultural modifications). When these values are established the total determines whether the area is A, B, or C, class scenery.

Class A scenery combines the most outstanding characteristics of each rating factor. Class B scenery combines some outstanding features and some that are fairly common to the physiographic region. Class C scenery combines features that are fairly common to the physiographic region.

VISUAL SENSITIVITY LEVELS

Sensitivity levels indicate the relative degree of user interest in visual resources and concern for changes in the existing landscape character. Public lands are assigned high, medium, or low sensitivity levels by analyzing the various indicators of public concern. Factors considered are the type of use, amount of use, public interest, adjacent land use, special areas, and other factors.

DISTANCE ZONES

The distance zones are outlined on topographic maps in three areas: (1) foreground/middleground, (2) background, and (3) seldom seen. The foreground/middleground zone is a distance of from 0 to 5 miles away. The background is the remaining area up to 15 miles distant, and seldom seen is the area beyond 15 miles. All distances are taken from any substantial travel corridor.

VISUAL RESOURCE INVENTORY CLASSES

Inventory classes are informational in nature only and are assigned through the inventory process. Class I is assigned to those areas where a management decision has been made previously to maintain a natural landscape. This includes areas such as national wilderness areas, the wild section of national wild and scenic rivers, and other congressionally and administratively designated areas where decisions have been made to preserve a natural landscape. Class II, III, and IV are assigned based on a combination of scenic quality, sensitivity level, and distance zones. This is accomplished by combining the scenic quality, sensitivity

levels, and distance zones maps, using a matrix (see BLM H-8410-1) to assign the proper inventory class.

VISUAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLASSES

Management classes are assigned through Resource Management Plans (RMPs). The assignment of visual management classes is ultimately based on the management decisions made in the RMPs. However, visual values must be considered throughout the RMP process. All actions proposed during the RMP process that would result in surface disturbance must consider the importance of the visual values and the impacts the project may have on these values. Management decisions in the RMP must reflect the value of visual resources. In fact, the value of the visual resource may be the driving force for some management decisions. For example, highly scenic areas, which need special management attention may be designated as scenic Areas of Critical Environmental Concern and classified as VRM class I based on the importance of the visual values (see Figure 13-2 for current VRM inventory classes).

OBJECTIVES FOR VISUAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT CLASSES

Class I Objective. The objective of this class is to preserve the existing character of the landscape. This class provides for natural ecological changes; however, it does not preclude very limited management activity. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be very low and should not attract attention.

Class II Objective. The objective of this class is to retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be low. Management activities may be seen, but should not attract the attention of the casual observer. Any changes must repeat the basic elements of form, line, color, and texture found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

Class III Objective. The objective of this class is to partially retain the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape should be moderate. Management activities may attract attention but should not dominate the view of the casual observer. Changes should repeat the basic elements found in the predominant natural features of the characteristic landscape.

Class IV Objective. The objective of this class is to provide for management activities, which require major modification of the existing character of the landscape. The level of change to the characteristic landscape can be high. These management activities may dominate the view and be the major focus of viewer attention. However, every attempt should be made to minimize the impact of these activities through careful location, minimal disturbance, and repeating the basic elements of the landscape.

(BLM 1992)

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